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The Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*: Structural Analysis Illuminates Character Motivation

Abstract

Uses structural analysis (from Levi-Strauss) of the Fourth Branch (the story of Lleu and Gwydion) to discover information about character motivations. Attempts to answer the apparent riddle of why Lleu sets up his own death.

Additional Keywords


The Mabinogion; Structural analysis (method of Claude Levi-Strauss)

The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS ILLUMINATES CHARACTER MOTIVATION

CORINNE LARSEN

Introduction

he following paper seeks to demonstrate that a methodical structural analysis of myth can lead to discoveries about the characters' motivation; to insights of a kind which could be useful to novelists. My first introduction to the elements and peculiar flavor of Welsh mythology came when, as a junior high school student, I read Lloyd Alexander's "Prydain" novels. Subsequently, I went back to their source, the English translation of the *Mabinogion* which in its present literary form dates from the 13th and 14th centuries. These mythic stories seemed a strange and confusing jumble to me then. Even so, the Fourth Branch story, the story of Lleu and Gwydion, made a special impression on me. Years later, when I was exposed to interpretive methods, I remembered the Fourth Branch story. It was like a riddle asking to be answered, teasing the reader to make sense out of it and to unravel and sort out the various threads. I was eager to try the new methods on this story and see what would come of it. I began without preconceptions about what I would find. I started at the beginning and worked through to the end. My logical tools were of the simplest and I used them as a mental computer program through which I ran the story and awaited the result. It would be asserting too much to say that I hoped to find the key to the myth and its strangeness. The result was surprising.

Methods

I started my analysis without any preconceptions about the characters or the meaning of events in the story, but I did begin with the preconception that these events were not the product of whimsicality. My working hypothesis was that myths are logical and make sense; sense which I hoped to find out using structural analysis. My analytical tools of interpretation came from the methods developed by Claude Levi-Strauss, specifically from my reading of the chapter "The Structural Study of Myth" in his *Structural Anthropology*. I found his emphasis on logic attractive.

Particularly useful to me was the hypothesis that the logic of myth consists in the reconciling of opposites, and that the human mind finds a natural satisfaction in devising and contemplating groups consisting of a thing, its opposite, and the mediator between the two. A second concept relating to this is the attractiveness of the idea of ambiguity, and the relationship between myth and riddle.

The translation of the Fourth Branch I used is that by Patrick K. Ford, but any good translation will do as the emphasis of my analysis is not linguistic but structural. I also consulted extensively the work by W. J. Gruffydd,

Math vab Mathonwy, published in 1928. His work contributes some interesting information and the disagreement I had with some of his methods and conclusions gave impetus to my interpretation.

Levi-Strauss' injunction to take all available variants of a myth into account is specifically for the purpose of comparative mythology. My purpose in this paper is not comparative mythology; rather, my aim is structural analysis for literary purposes and my quest is not for the earliest version but for the most meaningful one.

The Virgin Foot-Holder

Translator Patrick K. Ford has written:

It has often been noted that the fourth branch is the most complex of the *mabinogi* tales; it is, in the sense that there is less apparent continuity between its numerous episodes than is found in the other three branches. (Ford 28)

Of course I wish to take issue with this notion and the purpose of this paper is to show in what the continuity of this story consists. The Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogion* may be thought of as the story of Gwydion and Lleu, for they are the characters who emerge as the winners. But the first thing that confronts us as we enter the story is the virgin foot-holder. According to the opening of the tale, "Math son of Mathonwy could only live while his feet were in the lap of a maiden—unless the turmoil of war prevented him." Gruffydd accounts for the female foot-holder as the king's strategy to guard and ensure the virginity of a particular woman, because she could not lose her virginity with the king's feet in her lap day and night (Gruffydd 94). He makes this the subject of a death prophecy which does not come into the present story because it has been lost over the years. Be that as it may, what we have here is an instance of withholding: the reproductive powers of a woman are being withheld. The woman's name is Goewin daughter of Dol Bebin.

Goewin is desired by Gilfaethwy son of Don, brother of Gwydion. These brothers are nephews, sister's sons, of Math son of Mathonwy, the king who is keeping Goewin a virgin. Gwydion diverts Math with a war so that Gilfaethwy has the opportunity to rape Goewin. After this she disappears from the story and Gwydion seeks the post of virgin foot-holder to the king for his sister, Aranrhod. W. J. Gruffydd sees the two virgin foot-holders as a case of doubling, the result of confusion by people who did not understand the story they were telling as they put together bits and pieces of other stories as well as their faulty memories would let them, and Patrick K. Ford says the Goewin episode "bears no apparent relation to the rest of

the story" (Ford 89). But when I see the sequence:

[Goewin eliminated-----replaced by Aranhrod]
instead of complaining about a lack of consistency, I want to say: perhaps the meaning is that Goewin must be eliminated so that she can be replaced by Aranhrod. Whose idea is it that Gilfaethwy should rape Goewin, thereby making her ineligible to hold the post of virgin foot-holder, and whose idea is it that Aranhrod should replace her? Gwydion's. It is conceivable, based on the structure and the information within the story, that it is Gwydion's plan to eliminate Goewin and replace her with Aranhrod for reasons of his own, which will be explained later.

Aranrhod, when she comes to claim the post of virgin foot-holder, is required to step over Math's magic wand to prove her virginity. As she does this, far from proving her virginity, she gives birth to a boy (later called Dylan) and to "some little thing" which drops from her as she is hurrying out the door. Gwydion picks up the "little thing" and hides it in a chest at the foot of his bed. In Aranhrod, we have another case of withholding the reproductive powers of a woman, but in this case, the withholding is also by the woman, Aranhrod herself. The withholding of birth (signified by Aranhrod) is the opposite counterpart of the rape (signified by Goewin). For some reason Aranhrod wants to claim that she is still a virgin, and she is withholding birth and life from Dylan and Llew. Now if anyone besides herself knows that Aranhrod is not a virgin, it's Gwydion, if he is Llew's father. It is traditionally held that Gwydion and Aranhrod had an incestuous relationship. Gruffydd is certain of it (Gruffydd 136). I could construct a plausibly motivated story out of the first part of the Fourth Branch by saying that it is Gwydion's intention to help Gilfaethwy just in order to eliminate the virgin foot-holder and put Aranhrod in her place, so that he can publicly call Aranhrod's virginity into question and force her to give birth to his son. If such a thing could be, I would say that Dylan's and Llew's difference in size and development indicates that they were conceived at different times, probably by different fathers, and were both being withheld by Aranhrod until their release is engineered by Gwydion. I would say that Llew comes out as an embryo, which Gwydion then takes and puts into a chest until, after an unspecified time, he takes the baby Llew out of the chest. This episode creates an instance of ambiguity: When is Llew born — when he comes out of Aranhrod's body or when he comes out of the chest? This riddle is unanswerable, or answerable only according to how one defines "birth". Aranhrod obstructs the birth, obstructs Gwydion, but he gets around her. In the next part of the story he continues to get around her. I call this design element:

Circumventing The Woman

The episode of Llew's development in a chest proposes the question, "Are women necessary?" or "How necessary are they?" The rest of the account of Gwydion's dealings with Aranhrod on Llew's behalf continues to explore this question. Aranhrod continues to withhold things from

Llew, once he has been introduced to her by Gwydion as her son. She withholds, first: a name, second: arms or weapons, and third: a wife. She does this by swearing destinies against him or putting curses on him. We can understand the "name" as "personhood," the "arms" as "manhood" signified as social position or function, and the "wife" as "manhood" in its aspect of sexual maturity and head of a family unit. Gwydion gets the first two for Llew from Aranhrod by means of tricks and deceptions: disguises and false situations. To get the wife he goes completely around Aranhrod. She has sworn a destiny that Llew "will never get a wife from any race that's on this earth now." It's interesting that this point in the story, just where the woman Aranhrod becomes ultimately ineffectual, is also the point at which a woman is being created to be wife to the hero. So the question "Are women necessary?" receives a very ambiguous answer. At this point Aranhrod vanishes from the story and is replaced by Blodeuedd. Is Blodeuedd a woman or not? She was made by Math and Gwydion out of flowers. Is she a wife or not? She is unfaithful.

Groups of Three

There are a number of groups of three in the Fourth Branch stories. We have already encountered the three curses that Aranhrod put on Llew, and the three responses of Gwydion to these curses. There is the sequential pattern of the three women in the story. There are three animal transformations undergone by Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, and their three offspring. Blodeuedd is created from three kinds of plants. There are many other examples. Many of these threes are associated in the story with magic. Some of them can clearly be associated with Levi-Strauss' concept of groupings formed by two opposite extremes plus the mediator between them. In these cases three is a number standing for completeness because the mind is satisfied once it has found a mediator between opposites.

As punishment for the rape of Goewin, Math uses his magic to turn Gwydion and Gilfaethwy into animals: first deer, second wild pigs, and third wolves. After this, evidently they are considered completely punished, for Math changes them back into their human forms and fellowship is resumed as if a crime had never been committed. The completeness of their punishment is expressed by the animals in the group. Of all animals with four legs which are hunted, they have been one herbivore: the deer, one carnivore, its opposite: the wolf, and the pig, which as eater of both plants and flesh is the mediator between the other two. After this, the human mind and Justice as well, it appears, is satisfied.

When Math and Gwydion seek by their magic arts to conjure a wife for Llew, they make Blodeuedd out of flowers. Three kinds of flowers are used: oak, broom and meadowsweet. Gruffydd thinks that the different plants are necessary for different parts of her body (Gruffydd 252). He may be right, but I would say that the three flowers, one from a tree: the oak, one from an herb: the meadowsweet, and one from the mediator between them:

the shrub called broom, are the expression of completeness. Math and Gwydion are trying to create Blodeuedd in completeness and hope thereby to give their creation stability.

Riddles and In-between-ness

There is a relationship between riddles and in-between-ness. Often the riddles are devised as pairs of opposites the answer to which is either the mediator between them or else a state which is neither one nor the other. There will be more to say about riddles in the section on the prophecy about Llew's death, and about in-between-ness in the sections on animal and plant transformations.

Animal Transformations

We are already familiar with the transformations of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy into animals as punishment for the rape of Goewin. The animals they are changed into are wild animals. While in animal form, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy have three offspring: Hyddwn, Hychdwn, and Bleiddwn. At the end of each year the animal parents and their offspring have to return to Math. Each time he transforms the animal offspring into a human being, a male child. There is apparently no stigma attached to these three boys for having been born of animals, or of humans in the form of animals, or of criminals undergoing punishment, or of the incest of two brothers while in animal form. On the contrary, one is called "strong for his age" and another "big, fine, handsome." From evidence within the story it would seem that animal/human transformations are 1) relatively easy, and 2) stable. One magician can do it alone. It is done with the wand (variously called the rod or staff of enchantment). It is permanent until

removed with the wand. Math puts the succession of animal forms on his nephews and changes them back, finally, into human beings with the staff. If he had not changed them back, seemingly they would have remained in animal form forever. The three boys who are born to them are accepted into society, apparently, without any danger that they will turn back into animals. Gwydion must use his magician's rod to transform Llew, when he finds him, from an eagle back into a man, otherwise seemingly he would have remained an eagle forever. There will be more to say about Llew's transformation into an eagle in the section on Llew's death. The ease of passage from human to animal form and back again and the stability of the transformation argues an affinity between humans (male humans, anyway) and animals (wild animals). No truly "animal" animals are transformed into people, however. When a bride is needed for Llew, they do not seek to make her out of an animal but out of plants.

Plant Transformations

When Gwydion wants to get a name for Llew from Aranhod he deceives her by changing his own and Llew's appearance to that of shoemakers. They go along the sea shore and he conjures a ship from dulse and laminaria, and a supply of cordovan leather from seaweed and dulse. Gruffydd writes:

The appropriateness of seaweed and dulse as material for leather is obvious; they were chosen, of course, on account of their leathery appearance. By the same token, we may suppose that the sea-wrack . . . was chosen as appropriate for the strakes and masts. (234)

Be that as it may, I think the seaweed, dulse, etc. is used because one finds it on the seashore, and the seashore is an equivocal, in-between place. According to the tide, sometimes it is part of the land and sometimes part of the water. A riddle-question can be made out of it: Is the seashore part of the land or part of the water? It is ambiguous. It is one of the "places outside space." And it would seem that for magic of deception ambiguous materials are needed. When the deception has succeeded the magic ends: "the work vanished into dulse and seaweed." By then, Llew has his name.

The second deception, to get arms for Llew, also involves the sea coast around Aranhod's castle. Again Gwydion and Llew are magically disguised, and again the deceptive magic which creates a great host of ships lasts only a short time. Earlier in the story a deception is practiced by Gwydion on Pryderi. Gwydion conjures twelve completely outfitted horses and hounds and twelve golden shields out of mushrooms. The text is not clear whether everything is made out of mushrooms or just the shields. Patrick K. Ford reads it that they were all made out of mushrooms. Mushrooms and toadstools have no affinity with horses and hounds, although one could say that their shape is appropriate for shields. But their value here is rather their equivocal nature. Mushrooms and toadstools are very ambiguous: are they plants or aren't they? They defy classification as plants if plants are defined as those

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growing things which are green, have leaves and roots, need sunlight, etc. Their equivocal character makes them useful for deceptive magic. On this occasion, as in the other deceptions, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy and the ten men with them are in disguise. The magic transformation into horses, hounds and shields lasts only a short time. Gwydion specifically states that "the enchantment lasts but from one day to the next." We can now summarize what we know about the characteristics of magic with plants according to the story up to this point, the point at which Gwydion has succeeded in circumventing the first two of Aranrhod's curses: 1) it is relatively easy; one magician can do it alone. 2) it is unstable; it lasts only a short time and then disappears, that is, changes back without further agency. It is characterized by deception and ambiguity.

Now we come to the third destiny sworn against Lleu by Aranrhod. Aranrhod put a curse on Lleu that he would never have a wife of any race living on earth at that time. This time, the magic which circumvents the curse is not meant to deceive anyone, and yet Gwydion and Math make Blodeuedd out of plants. This time no equivocal plants are used because the object is not deception. On the contrary, plants which are unequivocal and of three clearly different kinds are used: the oak, the meadowsweet, and the broom — a tree, an herb, and a shrub. They hope by devising a group of three — two opposites and a mediator — to create Blodeuedd in completeness and ensure her stability.

The other transformations involving plants were of plants into things and domestic animals, intended as short-lived deceptions. This time the magicians are attempting a transformation of plants into a human being. Here is how their project can be characterized: 1) it is difficult; it requires the combined powers of two powerful magicians, 2) it is unstable. Although Blodeuedd retains her human form until changed by Gwydion into an owl for her sins, her instability is expressed by her unfaithfulness to her husband, Lleu. She plots Lleu's death: she is treacherous, deceitful, ambiguous. She has the characteristics we have learned to expect from and associate with plant magic. It seems as though Gwydion and Math ought to have known that if they made her out of plants she would be false. In other words, knowing what we do about plants in the previous parts of the story, we are not surprised to find that Blodeuedd is unfaithful.

Circumventing the Prophecy

False Blodeuedd and her lover Gronw make a plan to find out how Lleu may be killed. Evidently they already know it cannot be by any ordinary murder. Blodeuedd begs Lleu to tell her how he might be killed and he tells her: the spear which could kill him would have to be made over the span of one whole year, but worked on only during sacred times. These sacred times, in a pre-Christian age, would probably have been the two solstices and the two equinoxes, "moments outside time," four very equivocal times which taken all together express both completeness and ambiguity; which are neither one season nor the

other and which have very strong magical associations. Lleu also tells Blodeuedd that he cannot be killed "in a house, nor outside; neither on a horse nor on foot." She asks him to tell her, then, how he may be killed, and he tells her:

You make a bath for me on a river bank, and construct a roof-frame above the tub; after that, roof it so as to make a good shelter. Then bring along a billy-goat and station him beside the tub; I put my one foot on the billy's back and the other on the edge of the tub. Whoever should hit me in that position will kill me. (Ford trans., 105)

Blodeuedd sends this information to Gronw and he begins work on the magic spear.

When was there ever a story (folk-tale or myth) featuring a prophecy of a particular death or doom, in which the subject of the doom did not die according to the prophecy but met his death in some other way or even died an ordinary death? Everyone knows that the prophesied doom will come, though the fulfillment may be disguised, and that it's no use trying to avoid it. The story of Oedipus is a good case in point. The question is never *whether* the hero will die in the prescribed manner, but only *when* and *how* it will come about.

Notice that the destiny of Lleu's death is in the form of a riddle. Gruffydd asserts that such a riddle was always an intelligence test and was never used as a prophecy of death (Gruffydd p. 312, #276).

He ought to have said it was never used as a death-prophecy *until now*. In its new context, the intelligent answer would be one which not only meets the conditions but also eludes the doom. In the old riddles all the ambiguity was in the conditions and the ambiguous nature of the things which could bridge those conditions. The Fourth Branch masterstroke is to introduce ambiguity into the answer itself: is it an answer or not? Let us imagine Lleu himself, in earlier life, contemplating this riddle, wondering when he would meet his death and what form it would take. Let us imagine him, as a sort of amusement, concocting the solution about the bath and the billy-goat which is the answer he gives to Blodeuedd in the story. It is one good answer to the conditions of the riddle, but surely not the only answer; he might have gone on to meet a death which fulfilled the conditions in some totally unlooked-for way. It is a ridiculously far-fetched answer, but it is also an answer which Lleu himself can control.

The stage is now set to answer what have always been, for me, the chief puzzlements of the Fourth Branch story: 1) why does Lleu tell his wife how he may be killed?; 2) given her murder attempt according to the conditions, then why doesn't Lleu die?

Everyone who reads this story assumes that Lleu gave her the right answer and then they wonder why he doesn't die, or they don't wonder, they say it's just the whimsicality of these mythic things—you never can trust them to be logical. But surely any intelligent person with a charmed life knows that when people start asking you how you may

be killed, they are thinking of killing you. Lleu, as an amusement, to answer the riddle, has devised the method of his own death; and by telling it to Blodeuedd he has ensured it. He knows now both the manner and the time: at the end of one year. At the end of one year Gronw finishes the spear and Blodeuedd has the bath built and the goats collected. Lleu, instead of seeking to avoid his death, goes to meet it. He takes the position which will fulfill the conditions; Gronw throws the spear, hitting him. Instead of being killed he is transformed into an eagle. The gravely wounded bird flies away.

W. J. Gruffydd does not know what to do with the transformation into an eagle except try to account for its presence with references to other stories containing transformations into eagles or other animals (282-284). I think I can do something with the eagle as it is used in this story, never mind how it first got there. But first I want to reassert the question: why doesn't Lleu die as the prophecy-riddle said he would? I submit that it was the goat that did it, or rather the substitution of the goat for the horse. It will be remembered that the riddle specified "neither on a horse nor on foot." Nothing was said about goats. Surely the destiny of the riddle intended Lleu to have one foot on the tub or on the ground and one foot on a horse, and in this position he surely would have been killed. (Probably there would be many times in his life when he could be caught in the act of getting on or getting off a horse, possibly some time when the other conditions would be met as well.) Yet it cannot be denied that to be on a goat is also to be not on a horse. Here is ambiguity. Does the goat meet the conditions of the riddle or not?

It appears that the death-riddle works like a machine or a computer: put in the wrong pieces or the wrong data and it goes haywire—it doesn't work. Put ambiguity into it and you get ambiguity out: when Lleu is struck by the magic spear does he die, or doesn't he? Transformation is the answer to the question: what is it to be neither dead nor alive? In this ambiguous condition, Lleu's soul flies from the earth but does not reach heaven, since, though not alive, he is not dead either. He takes the form of an eagle, lordliest and highest-flying of birds as befits his status as a king and hero, because "eagle" is the answer, or one good answer, to the question: what is between earth and heaven? He mediates these two extremes at the same time he is stuck in ambiguity between life and death. If Lleu is transformed, can "Lleu" be said to exist?

Guided by a pig, an equivocal animal which both defies and mediates the boundaries of herbivores and carnivores, Gwydion finds the eagle after a long search. With his magic rod he transforms the wounded eagle back into Lleu. Gwydion and all the doctors in Gwynedd care for Lleu and he is soon healed. Gwydion turns Blodeuedd into an owl as she flees and Lleu kills Gronw with the same spear-blow Gronw gave him.

The three women in this story, Goewin, Aranhrod and Blodeuedd, are arranged in sequence and are never in the

story at the same time. They do not overlap; one disappearing from the narrative just as the next one appears. All three are circumvented, the first two by Gwydion and the last by Lleu. At the point where Aranhrod leaves the narrative and Blodeuedd enters it, the interest turns from circumventing the woman-as-withholder of life to circumventing the woman-as-giver of death. Blodeuedd designs Lleu's death but Lleu is able to survive his own "death." He gets around her. I propose that Lleu tricks Blodeuedd with his "goat;" that he knows it should have been "horse," and that he relies on the ambiguity of this substitution to defeat the death-riddle. He is not Gwydion's son for nothing. This interpretation refutes the idea that Lleu is a passive character who goes meek and unaware to his death, and the idea that his transformation is irrational.

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This issue was produced with difficulty, since I had Carpal Tunnel surgery on my right hand in September. Knowing that the operation was coming, about three weeks beforehand, I attempted to finish as much as possible before surgery, but much was still left to be done during the time my hand was recovering and unusable. It is usable now, but still stiff and touchy. I have an excellent Physical Therapist, who assures me I am coming along well and that I will have a full recovery. To work on the computer with one hand and one finger was a challenge! Whether or not this issue will be mailed by the deadline, at the time of writing this, is obviously still an open question. Evidently the trouble started with the repetitive motions of using the computer, primarily working on *Mythlore* and other Society business. After suffering for two and a half years, the time had come to remediate the problem. I am hopeful that the recovery will produce relief; if so, then the whole adventure was worth it.

—GG